

## THE NEXT BIG THING CORPORATE DRUMMING



Heard the latest business news? It goes boom-ba-da-boom-ba-da-boom. Across corporate Britain, trend-aware senior executives are switching off their BlackBerrys to hammer out primal African drumbeats. Step inside a conference centre, and you're increasingly likely to hear tribal chieftains from Shell or Coca-Cola drumming for hours with their underlings, in rhythmic pursuit of today's hottest management fad.

Over the past year or two, some of our biggest employers have embraced goatskin-tapping sessions as a tool for boosting morale. From Oracle to Orange, Pfizer to the Foreign Office, the demand for percussion workshops has even spurred an entirely novel class of business consultant. Armed with hundreds of African djembe drums, these "facilitators" are turning company awaydays into high-decibel exercises in group therapy.

For the consultants who lead the sessions, business is literally booming. "Our turnover doubled in the year to 2003, and has more than doubled again in the year after that," according to Doug Manuel, who runs Sewa Beats, one of the bigger UK corporate-drumming agencies. Manuel runs workshops for the likes of Marks & Spencer and Oracle, and a couple of weeks ago was

called in to drum harmony into a Royal & SunAlliance bash in Leicester. "There were two departments that weren't working particularly well together, so we taught each of them some things musically that only made sense when put together," he explains proudly. "After a debriefing from their HR people, they all left feeling pretty close."

Still, painful truths must occasionally be learnt. "With another client, the guy meant to be leading the music over-delegated to such an extent that he totally messed up the rhythm," Manuel recalls solemnly. "The lesson that group drew was that the more you complicate things, the more your strategy has to be absolutely right."

The suits seem to be lapping up these theories. Kraft Europe credits a drum workshop with "re-energising" staff and cutting stress; T-Mobile sees them as a way to "break down barriers" between managers and workers. Toyota was so excited that it built a dedicated drumming room in its Californian HQ. "I'll never forget the spirit

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that came alive inside me," explains Ron Johnson, the Toyota manager who became the company's leading drum-therapy evangelist. "In a matter of moments, perfect strangers came together in synchronistic rhythm to share a common vision."

You don't have to buy the management speak to sense a business opportunity here. Chief Suleman Chebe, originally from Ghana, has found himself a cosy new niche working as "senior rhythm consultant" out of Glasgow for a company called Drumming Up Business. Such is demand that his recent clients include Strathclyde Police, the National Trust of Scotland and even the Cabinet Office.

Yet... can we really take seriously a conference centre packed, typically, with white males of a certain age pounding out their corporate mating calls? Won't this trend prove rather embarrassing for them, once the photos leak on to the company intranet? "It's easy to knock it," admits Doug Manuel. "But everyone has a heart-beat, and once a rhythm gets going, it gets in your bones. You can't help but join in." ■

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